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# Balm for Botha and Shots at the Sandinistas

A British anthropologist once discovered a tribe in Burma that changed its entire conception of the universe according to the seasons. In the summer months, when the tribe lived up in the hills, its theology was sanguine and its political philosophy democratic. In the winter, when the tribe moved to the valley floor, this benign outlook gave way to a grimmer, more tormented eschatology and to authoritarian political beliefs. The Reagan administration, reflecting the sophistication of a civilization "higher" than that of the Burmese

## Viewpoint

by Alexander Cockburn

tribe, manages similarly radical shifts in its beliefs without even moving out of Washington, and in the time frame not of a year but of a week and even a single day.

Take the cases of South Africa and Nicaragua. Since the beginning of Mr. Reagan's first term the administration has galloped over the South African veldt in pursuit of the chimera of "constructive engagement," otherwise known as "quiet diplomacy" or "negotiation behind the scenes." Thus liberated from noisy diplomacy or public arm-twisting, the white, racist government of South Africa has intensified its repression of the country's 20 million disenfranchised blacks, managing to murder 300-400 of them in the past 10 months.

In the face of detailed descriptions of torture, as of the Rev. Simon Farisani, the Reagan administration remained complacent. The murder of those detained in prison aroused little or no concern. When the South African police shot down unarmed men, women and children earlier this year, President Reagan suggested that these victims had somehow brought it on themselves. In 1984 the Botha government promulgated a new constitution that accurately summed up the effect of four years of "constructive engagement": This constitution provided parliamentary representation without power for Indians and coloreds (by which are meant South Africans of mixed race) and nothing at all for the 20 million blacks. The sole engagement, constructive or otherwise, that the constitution made with the democratic aspirations of these blacks was a single clause, that the "control and administration of black affairs shall rest with the president."

The emergency announced by the Botha government on July 20 signaled an intensification of the repression. More than a

thousand people are already being held, and the aim of the police is clear: to "decapitate" black protest by locking up every organizer and leader they can find. If the fate of one such leader, Matthew Goniwe, is any guide, some of these organizers will not survive their sojourn in prison. At the end of June, Mr. Goniwe, one of the most admired of black leaders, failed to return from a meeting in Port Elizabeth and his mutilated and charred body was subsequently discovered next to a highway amid the widespread belief that the police were responsible.

At long last the administration, against rumbles from Congress about economic sanctions, has itself begun to make noises and strike the odd rhetorical pose, while continuing to insist on the utility of constructive engagement. Almost the only piece of good news is that a State Department intelligence study has concluded that present turmoil in South Africa does not represent, in the words of a White House official, "a revolutionary or a pre-revolutionary situation." If this is the word from the masterminds who saw no serious problems for the shah in 1979 and no serious military threat from Egypt to Israel in the fall of 1973, we may expect Nelson Mandela to assume power by Labor Day.

Now mark the abrupt shift in theology and general world outlook as the administration (and, it goes without saying, the editorial outlook of these pages) swivels from South Africa to Central America. During four years of thickening night in South Africa, the Nicaraguan government, by contrast, produced a constitution that was attended by the first democratic election in the nation's history. The torture practiced by the agents of Anastasio Somoza, a dictator with whom the U.S. had the most constructive and, indeed, prolonged of engagements, has been ended along with the death penalty.

But since torture and judicial murder have been abolished by the Sandinistas, the U.S., abhorring a vacuum, has made sure that such practices survive, by financing and training the contras, whose tortures and murders of Nicaragua's civilian population have been abundantly documented. This export of terror into Nicaragua by the U.S. has been accompanied by other forms of destructive engagement, including a trade embargo and the blocking of multilateral aid. And, adding final insult to extreme injury, the president recently singled out Nicaragua, along with four other nations, as one that was itself "exporting" terror. Thus has Nicaragua been rewarded for its own gestures of constructive engagement with the U.S.

Congress has lately showed itself to be in sympathy with the president's efforts to improve the volume of his country's terror exports. External AFDC (aid to the families of dependent contras) has been approved, along with other gestures of good will toward the White House such as the repeal of the Clark Amendment, thus permitting aid to Jonas Savimbi's contras in the Angolan bush. This vote in Congress would have left that Burmese tribe dizzy with admiration. On one day the folk in Congress talk about sanctions against the South African government; on the next they clear the way for funding of a "proxy" of that government, which has been of extreme importance in maintaining South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia. This is the sort of "signal" from Washington that is greeted with raptures by Mr. Botha and his men.

If this "signal" was not enough, there is now a report, by Alfonso Chardy in the Miami Herald's Washington bureau, that among officials in the White House and Defense and State departments there is being mooted the idea of a "freedom fighters bureau" to coordinate anti-communist insurgents around the world. Preliminary estimates of the cost of this "White International" of counterrevolution tote up to \$1 billion, although the rapacious corruption of the intended recipients—former national guardsmen in the Nicaraguan contras, Afghan bandits and feudal landlords, allies of Pol Pot in Cambodia, hirelings of the South Africans in Mozambique and Angola, to name but a few—will doubtless multiply that sum greatly.

Over the months to come we can expect Burma Syndrome to continue apace. On one day, howls of denunciation against the white South African police state, with an escalation of diplomatic protest; on the next, hearty endorsement of all the forces kindred to that police state in philosophy and behavior, along with avoidance of the fierce economic measures—serious economic sanctions and embargoes—that might actually impel the Botha regime to recognize the rights of the majority of the country's citizens.